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Review of *In the Kingdom of Grass* By Margaret A. MacKichan and Bob Ross

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MacKichan's eye, sharpened by several extended immersions in Sandhills society, captures perfectly both the working cowboy's laconic go-to-hell honesty and a mother's fierce protective pride. And whether a young brother or sister on horseback or a slightly querulous septuagenarian, these are subjects that trust the camera. They are caught not in careful pose but in concentrated endeavor and often appear eager to resume visiting with the person behind the lens, to ask the border-line personal question, to share a cherished nugget of neighborhood lore. Should we momentarily lose our sense of place in the seasonal rhythms of ranch life—the fall drives, winter feedings, spring brandings, summer haying—MacKichan retrieves us with a few stunning shots of the great somnolent horizon of the Sandhills. No perspective on earth could be any more humbling.

Bob Ross does not directly explicate MacKichan's photographs. Rather he confronts us with his own sense of place, a place nearer the eastern edge of the hills where he grew up. The best sections of these superb essays feature Uncle Ozro—a humorous fellow who nurtured and drove Ross to manhood while harboring a weakness for strong drink and an unrewarding relationship with money—and a long series of hired men who gave employers and their nephews full measure of work and patient tutorial devotion in between week-long benders in town. Uncles can break down under the constant vagaries of markets and weather, the idiocy of bankers, and the cruelties of disease. But when they pass, landowner uncles at least leave a mark on the land, if only in a neighbor's giving directions past the "old Smith place." Hired hands depart trackless, their ephemeral legacy a temporarily repaired fence, fresh leathers in a windmill that will soon wear out, a newly broken horse fated to die or be sold, a branded calf that won't be on the ranch past November. When Ross describes walking past a favorite former hired hand, now slumped drunk and broken against a filling station wall, without the barest acknowledgement, not even a silent nod, he

In the Kingdom of Grass. By Margaret A. MacKichan and Bob Ross. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Photos. xi + 130 pp. \$40.00.

The 20,000-square-mile Nebraska sandhills are home to a rich brew of flora and fauna. Nearly every breed of cattle in the world can be found somewhere between Oshkosh and Ainsworth. Blue gill and sandhill cranes share its numerous potholes and lakes with thousands of more or less congenial fellow residents and visitors. When Bob Ross finished the last of his resplendent essays and Margaret MacKichan printed her final loving photograph, however, it was the human beings of the Sandhills that dominated their portrait.

writes the poignant epitaph of not only the transient hands that populate ranch country, but of the families that use them up in their constant battle to hang on to land and cattle.

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